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THE DEATH OF PRESIDENT GARFIELD.

GOD IN HISTORY.

A SERMON, BY REV. OLIVER DYER.



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MOUNT VERNON, N. Y., SEPTEMBER 25TH, 1881.



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MT. VERNON, *September 27th, 1881.*

Rev. OLIVER DYER, Mt. Vernon,

Reverend Sir: Having had the pleasure of listening to your very excellent Sermon, delivered on Sunday, September 25th, on the death of our late President, and being desirous that those who did not hear it may have the opportunity of reading it, and wishing, in common with many of our fellow-citizens, to have the Sermon in permanent form, we respectfully ask you to furnish us the manuscript, that we may have it published.

Very truly yours,

WM. H. VAN COTT,
HENRY HUSS,
JAS. H. JENKINS.

MOUNT VERNON, *September 28th, 1881.*

Judge WM. H. VAN COTT, Colonel HENRY HUSS, and
Major JAMES H. JENKINS,

Gentlemen: In response to your letter of yesterday, requesting me to furnish you my Sermon of last Sunday, for publication, I herewith send you the manuscript thereof.

Very truly yours,

OLIVER DYER.

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By transfer
JAN 21 1909

S E R M O N .

The Lord reigneth; let the earth rejoice; let the multitude of isles be glad thereof. The heavens declare his righteousness, and all the people see his glory. Light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart. Rejoice in the Lord, ye righteous; and give thanks at the remembrance of his holiness (Ps. xcvi: 1, 6, 11 and 12).

IT is noticeable—impressively noticeable—that the reign of the Lord is indissolubly connected with uprightness, righteousness, justice, purity, holiness, love, joy, and gladness. Wherever His kingdom comes and His will is done “light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart,” and “all the people see His glory, and give thanks for the remembrance of His holiness.”

The primary object, the central object, the first and last object, the full, complete, eternal object of the Lord's reign, as revealed to us in His Word, is to have human beings become upright, righteous, just, pure, and holy, that they may be filled with joy and gladness, and become His true children, and abide with Him, in heavenly innocence, blessedness and glory, forever and ever. That is the perpetual, ever-acting purpose of Providence in human history. For that purpose the great cycles of time have swung round; for that purpose the vast evolutions of matter and mind and spirit have gone on; for

that purpose all the vicissitudes of humanity have blossomed forth ; and thus it will be forever.

One of the chief difficulties which beset us when we attempt to consider the government of God in the world, is a tendency to dwell on particular circumstances, and wonder how a just and merciful God, who is all-wise and all-powerful, could permit such things to come to pass. There is a strong, and perhaps an irresistible tendency in every one to exaggerate the importance and the terribleness of whatever affects him and his ; of any misfortune that overtakes himself, or his family or friends, or his party, or his country, or the age in which he lives. This tendency is so deep and universal, it is such a constitutional, structural element of humanity, that it is embodied in Holy Writ and given voice in the Word of God. "Is it nothing to you?" the prophet cries, "Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto *my* sorrow, which is done unto *me*, wherewith the Lord hath afflicted *me* in the day of His fierce anger."

When any one who is dear to us dies we are apt to wonder what we have done that we should be thus afflicted. The bereavement seems hard, and harsh, and cruel. It is difficult, if not impossible, for us to see what the use of it is. We cannot help thinking that it might just as well have been otherwise. And if a very great calamity oc-

curs which affects our country and stirs the general heart to grief, there are thousands ready to cry out against it, and against Providence, and to doubt the reign of a just and merciful God, and to give up faith and trust, and fall back on fate and chance, and perhaps sink into despair. This specializing of afflictions, this personal magnifying of misfortunes and calamities, this exaggeration of *their* importance and *our* importance, works mischief. It misleads our judgment; it switches us off the track of faith in Providence; it too often ends, as has already been said, by plunging us into doubt and despair.

This querulous, specializing view is the only view which many people take of the events which have afflicted us with such fullness of sorrow since the second day of last July. Why did God allow all this to happen? What had President Garfield or his family done, that he and they should have been thus afflicted? What has this nation done that it should be thus afflicted? are the querulous questions that we hear on every side. Let us try to answer these questions by means of an illustration.

When General James A. Garfield, at the head of his brigade, in those cold and sleety January days of 1862, forced General Humphrey Marshall to evacuate Kentucky with his command, many innocent men were killed, wounded, mangled, on

both sides. Some simple-minded person, overwhelmed at the spectacle of so much horror and suffering, might have asked, Why does the merciful, the tender-hearted, the magnanimous Garfield permit such cruel killings and manglings to take place? The intelligent answer would have been: Because the work which he is called upon to do, cannot be done without such things taking place. No matter how much he may detest bloodshed, no matter how much his heart may be wrung by war's cruel incidents, he must press relentlessly on, without regard to the victims that will inevitably strew his army's path.

Have you never observed that no great movement ever takes place without victims? That what is greatly, grandly, widely beneficent seldom, if ever, comes to pass without working hardship, and suffering, and often death, to somebody? That every progression of the human race towards perfection (as well as the perfecting of the great Captain of our salvation), is only brought to pass through sufferings? Why is all this so? Because man is a free agent, and has the power of choice between good and evil, and so perversely chooses evil that his Heavenly Father cannot save him from suffering without taking away his freedom, which, of course, He will not do, because, should He deprive man of his freedom, man would then be a mere automaton, and no man at all.

Let us help ourselves to understand this matter by coming back to our military illustration. Imagine General Garfield to have been the commander-in-chief of all the armies of the Union. We now know what a gentle, patient, loyal, longsuffering Christian heart he had. Let us imagine the military operations of the war under the control of that gentle, patient, loyal, longsuffering Christian heart. And then let us consider the sickness, the suffering, the death, the carnage, the horrors of all the campaigns, of the marchings and countermarchings, of the sieges and battles incident to the war, and the saddened homes, and the widows' and orphans' tears, all of which would have been the direct result of the deliberate determinations of that gentle, patient, loyal, longsuffering Christian heart; and what shall we say about it? What is the justification of all this carnage and suffering and misery and woe? The justification is, that the object sought was worth it all, yea, many times worth it all.

We know that, as a matter of fact, the control of the war, of that grand movement and progression in the onward march of the human race, was (by virtue of his office as President of the United States) largely under the direction of one who was never excelled for kindness of heart and Christlike charitableness of spirit. No man ever deplored war more than Abraham Lincoln did. No man

ever had a more tender heart than he—a heart so great and so magnanimous that it sympathized with the sufferings of foes as well as with the sufferings of friends. He carried the nation's woe—the woe of both South and North—in that great, magnanimous heart during all those four bloody years ; as could be seen by the deep furrows worn in that homely, genial countenance, and the constantly increasing depth and tenderness of those calm, luminous, sad eyes which were at once expressive of his yearning, patriotic sorrow and prophetic of his tragical fate. And yet, did he pause ? Did he shrink from the discharge of his great duty because of the inevitable sufferings of both friends and foes ? No ; he went right on, calm and gentle and loving and firm as God's Providence itself, of which he was the instrument. And why did he thus go on ? Because the object sought was of such consequence and value as immeasurably to outweigh all the suffering and misery and woe which it cost.

And what was *that* movement, *that* progression, whose throes lasted only a few years in one small section of the globe, in comparison with the grand movement and progression of the human race at large, which has lasted from the creation of man until now, and is to go on for yet uncounted æons ? And if in such a comparatively small and isolated movement and progression there had to be so

much misery and suffering and woe, how much more must be required in that far grander movement and progression of humanity ?

“ But,” perhaps some one is ready to ask, “ why didn’t the Creator fix things so there would be no necessity for all this misery and suffering and woe ? ” The answer to that question is : Because He wanted to have a human race that would do Him credit when it should reach its stages of perfection ; because He wanted *real* men and *real* women, possessing patience and fortitude, love and wisdom, true manliness and true womanliness, with mental, moral and spiritual stamina in abundance ; and the only way in which human beings can acquire these qualities is through chastening experience, through hardships and sufferings and all manner of distresses. We sometimes meet a person who has never been conjugated in the passive voice of life’s inexorable verb, who has never suffered, who has never been in stress of circumstances, who has floated through life on a sea of rosewater, and what kind of a creature do we find such a person to be ? We find such a person to be weak, ignorant, mean, selfish, babyish, contemptible. And how, with all of God’s resources, can He make a respectable human being out of such a creature ? Why, by subjecting it to a course of misfortune, hardship, suffering. Is there any other way that intelligence and experi-

once enable us to conceive of? We all know that there is none.

Suppose a drummer boy, on beholding some of the distressing incidents of war, should question the wisdom and mercy of the commander-in-chief! How absurd his querulousness would be! But was there ever a drummer boy who was not far more competent to question the wisdom and mercy of his commander-in-chief, than the wisest man that ever lived is to question the wisdom and mercy of Almighty God? Does a drummer boy come as far short of understanding a military campaign as the wisest man comes of understanding the eternal sweep of things, running through unimaginable cycles of ages and embracing not only all human and finite possibilities, but all divine and infinite ones also? And if it would be presumptuous, and absurd, and intolerable for a drummer boy to doubt, and question, and shake his head over the conduct of his commander-in-chief, what shall we say of him who doubts, and questions, and shakes his head over the conduct of the everliving God, in whom he pretends to believe? I say, in whom he *pretends* to believe; for it is difficult to imagine how any one can really believe in God, who doubts His wisdom, or questions His Providence. If I did not believe in God all through, I could not believe in Him at all. He either is God, or else He is not God. If He is God, then all the rest follows; and

it is folly for any one, simply because he cannot understand some of the incidents of the Infinite Campaign, to play the *rôle* of a querulous and conceited drummer boy in the army of the Eternal, and question or doubt the wisdom and mercy of his Divine Commander-in-chief.

As it is with the individual, so it is with the human race, which, taken as a whole, is a grand, universal man. It is the same, also, with any particular nation; and if we look closely into the matter, we shall see that nations are born and developed, and decay and die in a manner analogous to the way in which individuals go through the same processes and vicissitudes. The Lord says to the nation or to the race, just as He says to the individual: "Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart." Here is the point of the whole matter, the pivot on which the whole progressive and perfecting movement of men and of mankind turns. We must all take the Lord's yoke upon us and learn of Him. The Lord's yoke is the symbol, and the very fact and spirit of mental, moral and spiritual discipline; of obedience to law, of that manly subordination to the principles of everlasting righteousness, of which our Saviour gives us the great Divine example. The Lord's yoke is the yoke of righteousness, justice, love, purity, obedience, humility, mercy and holiness. It is a yoke that restrains

our false and evil propensities, and sets our true and good propensities in working order. We have special need of that yoke now, when men are hanging Guiteau in effigy, and breathing threats of lawless violence and vengeance against him. We have need of this yoke when we see that deep, subtle, terrible oath of vengeance, which only a Shakespeare could formulate, quoted with approbation :

“ Kneeling before this ruin of sweet life,
And breathing to his breathless excellence
The innocence of a vow, a holy vow,
Never to taste the pleasures of the world,
Never to be infected with delight,
Nor conversant with ease and idleness
Till I have set a glory to this head,
By giving it the worship of revenge.”

And when this tempest-burst of vengeance is quoted thousands respond, as do the characters in the play :

“ Our souls religiously confirm thy words.”

The human race has been in process of development for countless ages. It is nearly nineteen hundred years since our Lord uttered that touching invitation to all who wish for rest to come unto Him and take His yoke upon them, that they might find rest unto their souls. We profess to believe the Christian doctrines, and are counted among that portion of mankind which is the topmost flower of human development and enlightenment ; and yet there are sections of our coun-

try in which Guiteau would not be safe from lawlessness for an hour, and it is doubtful if the lynching of him would distress any of us very much, were it not for the fear that it would hurt our standing with the civilized world. Ah! how much we have yet to learn, and through what seas of suffering we may have to pass in learning it! But we may be sure that when the Providential object or end, the perfected result, shall be attained, it will be worth all the cost, in the case of nations and of the human race, as well as in that of individuals.

It took ages for the now civilized portions of mankind to overcome the savage thirst for revenge, so far as to take offences from the tribunal of personal passion and hand them up to the adjudication of unimpassioned courts of law. That progression is one phase, and an inexpressibly important phase of the Lord's yoke which civilization has to some extent taken upon itself after much sorrowful experience. Let us not be parties to anything which would tend to loosen this yoke from off the conscience of the nation, and send us back towards the barbarism from which our branch of the race, after ages of contest with their baser passions, slowly emerged.

And yet, notwithstanding these principles and sentiments of law and religion, which we doubtless all intellectually approve, it is not to be dis-

guised that, struggle with our passions as we will, and pray as fervently as we may, the assassination of President Garfield is an event which tries to the utmost the religion of some of the most religious. No matter how obedient to the Lord's yoke we try to be, when we allow ourselves to think of the circumstances of the assassination, we are in danger of getting beside ourselves and wildly wishing the yoke were a material substance that we could use as an implement with which to beat out the assassin's brains. We cannot summon up language of our own with which to express our sense of the atrocity, the shameful, the maddening imbecility of the crime, which

" Is the very top,
The height, the crest, the crest unto the crest,
Of murder's arms; which is the bloodiest shame,
The wildest savagery, the vilest stroke,
That ever wall-eyed wrath or staring rage
Presented to the tears of soft remorse."

In the bewildering swirl of our grief, we are tempted to censure Providence and conjure up pictures of something better which might have happened. The fact is recalled to us by numberless orators and newspaper writers, that, on the 19th of September, 1863, just eighteen years before he died at Elberon, General Garfield rode through a tempest of "leaden rain and iron hail" at Chickamauga without finding a bullet for himself, although horses were shot under him and com-

panions were slain at his side. Why, it is asked, could he not have fallen gloriously on that famous battle-field and died like a hero, instead of living to be shot down in such an unspeakably villainous manner? How much better it would have been for him to have been slain there, as by the lightning's stroke, than to linger for nine-and-seventy days in perpetual agony, and waste away by slow degrees.

At first thought, and under the influence of their sympathy for his sufferings, many good people respond affirmatively to these sentiments, and say: "Yes; how much better it would have been!" and question the ways of Providence with more or less bitterness, because it was not suffered thus to be.

But, would it have been better? Would it have been better for General Garfield, or for his family, or for his country, or for Christendom? I think that, on reflection, the most querulous questioner of Providence will say: No; it would not have been better. Had General Garfield been slain at Chickamauga he would have missed the greatest usefulness and the crowning glory of his life, and one of the brightest, noblest, sweetest pages in the history of his country and of Christendom would never have been written.

The workings of Providence cannot be foreseen. They do not become visible until they have

taken place. You will remember that when the prophet of God requested to see Jehovah, he was only permitted to see His back after He had passed by. That is all we can see of the Lord in His Providence; we see the results after He has passed by. And His passage sometimes occasions marvelous illuminations, in the light of which things that were before obscure and seemingly of no importance, are seen to be of priceless value, and forever stand as glorious examples and beacon-lights to mankind. This is pre-eminently so in the providential career of President Garfield. All unknown to the world he, as child and boy, had lived one of the noblest lives, one of the most filial lives, one of the sweetest, gentlest, most dutiful lives ever lived by any child or boy on earth. But the precious lesson of that life was in danger of being lost to the world. It was lying hidden away in obscurity, like the neglected negative of a photograph, and no picture of it seemed likely to be taken. But the patience, the fortitude, the gentleness, the sweet, trusting Christian faith and resignation of that suffering man during all those weary days of anguish; the spectacle of a man suffering thus for such a prolonged period, without ever uttering one word of complaint, one murmur of impatience, but constantly maintaining a cheery, kindly, gracious spirit, turned the attention of the world upon him, and in the light of

the universal admiration and love which he inspired, the negative of his obscure young life to its minutest lines, has been developed into a picture, which, we may in moderation believe, will be forever prized by civilized peoples as one of the most valuable possessions of mankind.

I hope it will not be thought amiss that I take such pride—such fond, fraternal, patriotic pride in the young life—the young American life—of James Garfield. Let us try to get some glimpses of it.

His father died when James was eighteen months old. There were two brothers older than he, and one sister. He was the baby—his mother's enduring baby that Guiteau shot. The family was living in a log cabin in the woods that lined the shore of Lake Erie, in Cuyahoga county, Ohio. The father left them fifty acres of wild land. The widowed mother sold a part of it to get a small sum wherewith to buy the necessities of life and improve the remainder of the land.

“Improve the remainder of the land!” Have you any idea what that phrase meant to that woman away off there in the woods, on the shore of Lake Erie, forty-eight years ago? I will not give the particulars of its meaning to her. The recital would be too painful. I will mention, however, that among the lighter labors which she had to perform was the fencing of the farm, and that she split the

rails and built the fences herself with but little assistance besides that of her oldest boy, who was scarcely more than a child in years.

The baby, James, from the time he had an idea, was particularly devoted to his mother. Clinging to her dress as soon as he could walk, he followed her about, trying to help her in his infantile way. And it was not long before he could really help her, by fetching and carrying little things and gathering chips, and in various other small ways. And he never ceased to help his mother. He loved her, and honored her, and served her with all his heart, mind, soul and strength. And in the exercise of that filial love and devotion he laid the foundation of his character; and in that rough and tough school of filial service in those Lake Erie woods he acquired something more precious than the most richly endowed institution of learning could have given him. He was living a life in accordance with the commandments of God, and by his conduct he opened his mind and heart to the influx of Divine truth and love; and that light which is sown for the righteous illuminated his understanding, and his soul was nourished by that gladness which is for the upright in heart.

By the time he was ten years old he had learned the value of ready money and how much his mother needed it; and that he might earn some ready money for her, he, mere child though he was,

sought and obtained employment as a woodchopper, and in the course of two years, working as he had opportunity, the devoted boy had earned and saved twenty-five dollars, which he proudly and joyously laid in his mother's lap. Perhaps there are persons here who have some notion what a vast sum twenty-five dollars in cash was in a remote region thirty-eight years ago.

James then wanted to go to sea, and his mother at last consented to his going. He went to Cleveland, then a thriving young city, but to him a vast seaport. He failed to get a berth as a sailor, and no wonder, considering his extreme youth. But, determined to help his mother, he resorted to work which he loathed—driving mules on the towpath of the Ohio canal—because he could get no other employment. When he returned home, his elder brother and himself built the weather-board house in which the family thenceforward lived. It was roughly, but honestly and thoroughly built. Then James went to work at the carpenter's trade, and bought books, and studied nights, and after awhile went to a country school; and from that time his history is well known.

What a lesson there is for us in this child life and boy life, if we have the mind, aye, if we have the *heart* to read it aright! It is said—and it is an old and familiar adage—that the boy is father to

the man. How true the old adage was in this case. Here was a faithful, dutiful little boy, living in obscure simplicity and innocence, saying his prayers at his mother's knee, and serving his mother with absolute devotion. You all remember what occurred when that boy, grown to manhood, was sworn in as President of the United States; how he immediately went to his mother, grown venerable in years, and kissed her with the same filial respect and devotion, and with the same childlike simplicity, with which he caressed her in their rustic home in his boyish years. That boy was certainly father to that man. And that boy was a Bible boy. He was obedient, faithful, loving. He honored his parents. He honored his dead father; he honored his living mother. It is doubtful if the commandment, "Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee," was ever more faithfully kept, both in its letter and in its spirit, than by that little Garfield boy.

And here some one may ask, "Why, then, didn't the Lord keep His promise, and make his days long in the land which He gave him, instead of suffering him to be cut off in the very prime and pride of his manhood?"

That is a fair question, from the doubting and censorious point of view; and it is a question which

any one, who is so disposed, has a right to ask. Let us consider it :

Has not the Lord kept his promise to that boy? Yea, has He not kept it in the fullest measure? Is there any other man of this generation to whom the Lord, through His Providence, has given this land in such absolute fullness and completeness as he has given it to James A. Garfield? Is there any other man of this generation who has such an enduring hold on all parts of the land? and not only this land, but all the lands of the civilized world? Who possesses all that is best and most enduring in them all in such full measure as President Garfield? And shall not his days be long in them? Is there anybody of this generation who will live longer in them than he will live?

When we are considering the promises of God, and the Providence of God, and God in history, we must rise above the limitations of narrow, sensuous temporal views, and try to look upon these great subjects in the light of spiritual and eternal truth, if we would understand God's promises, and be blessed in our understanding of them.

I pass by the many social, political, sectional and national lessons which the events we are now considering carry for us in their bosom. The newspapers have said, and are saying, and saying well, all that need be uttered on these points. But I cannot

forbear to revert once more to that child life, and boy life, in those Lake Erie woods. There was the germ and the root of that character which all the world now admires and loves. Let the history of that young life be spread before the children of the land. Let it be incorporated in their school books. Let them learn it by heart. Let its full significance be taught to them. Let the children and youth of the land learn, and if possible let the lesson be engraven in their hearts, that the child that is faithful to its parents, and loves, honors, obeys, and serves them with fidelity and devotion, as it has opportunity, is in the direct current of God's Providence. A child need not be poor to secure the benefits of this lesson. No matter what its station or its circumstances may be, if with all its heart, mind, soul and strength, it thus honors, obeys and serves its father and its mother, or whichever parent the Providence of God may have left it on earth, as that little boy in those Lake Erie woods honored, obeyed and served his mother, the promises of its Heavenly Father "to those who remember His commandments to do them" will be kept to that child. Though such a faithful and obedient child may sometimes fall, it "shall not be utterly cast down." Its nature will be enlarged and enriched and ennobled and strengthened by Divine influences. The seeds of true manliness, or of true womanliness,

will be planted deep in the recesses of its spirit in the spring-time of its life, from which, by proper cultivation through the summer of its manhood or womanhood, a rich harvest of honor and usefulness may be garnered in the autumn of its age. These are some of the precious lessons which may be learned, not only by the boys and girls of this land, but by its men and women also, from the child life, and the boy life, and the grown up life of James A. Garfield. And that life further teaches us the practical lesson that we need more Bible, more mother—religious mother—more of the Spirit of God in the education of our children, if we would have them develop into the highest types of men and women; that the heart, the conscience, the whole moral nature must be educated, as well as the intellect, if we would have men and women who shall be a blessing to their families and their country and an honor to their race.

To-morrow, the body of our beloved President is to be laid away in the tomb. The heart of the world will be turned to its resting place. The tears of mankind will be shed for our American boy. The greatest of earth's potentates will mingle their tears for him with those of peasants and people of every degree. No such spectacle has ever before been witnessed in this world. Our President "sinks to rest," not only "by all his country's

wishes blest," but also by the heartfelt wishes of mankind. And

" When Spring, with dewy fingers cold,
Returns to deck his hallowed mould,
She there shall dress a sweeter sod,
Than Fancy's feet have ever trod.
By fairy hands shall his knell be rung,
By forms unseen his dirge be sung;
There Honor 'll come, a pilgrim gray,
To bless the turf that wraps his clay,
And Freedom shall awhile repair,
To dwell a weeping hermit there."

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